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SUBJECT: THE BATTLE FOR THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF SURINAME'S MAROONS

REFS: (A) PARAMARIBO 607 (B) PARAMARIBO 751

(C) PARAMARIBO 318

1. (SBU) Summary. Suriname's "Maroon" population came to political prominence in the 2005 elections, with their five seats in parliament the key to the governing coalition's thin margin (29 of 51 National Assembly seats). The Maroons are descendants of escaped African slaves living primarily in the isolated interior but with increasing urban numbers. This pivotal role has made the Maroons a prized political constituency, earning their concerns attention from both their government partners and an ambitious NDP opposition. End summary.

New Attention to Old Woes by New Front Plus

2. The current governing New Front Plus (NF-Plus) coalition in Suriname reached its majority by embracing the five seats captured by the A-Combination (AC), the result of Suriname's Maroon populations coalescing politically for the first time since independence. AC parlayed the king-making power of its seats into three cabinet positions, the first time the party had occupied either parliamentary or ministerial seats.

3. Where the previous New Front government had frequently been accused of ignoring the needs of the Maroon constituency, New Front Plus has rolled out several well-publicized events involving Maroon ministers in a bid to repay that support. Most active has been the Minister of Regional Development Michel Felisie, who recently laid the first stone of a small hydroelectric plant in the interior that will provide electricity to 13 villages. The AC ministers were also out in force at a recent rainforest arts festival held in Paramaribo.

4. Since the election, the AC's Maroon base has had high, some say unrealistic expectations of their political leaders. These expectations confronted harsh reality when the government's doubling of gasoline prices in September led many in the AC's base to criticize the government and the AC for failing to cushion the price shock for their largely poverty-stricken constituency. While AC leaders have shown no willingness to support demands for a reversal of the fuel hike, they have been quick to stress their understanding for hardship it has caused, particularly to those in remote areas, and have begun developing proposals to ease that pain. Some ideas discussed thus far are establishing subsidized boat routes to act as bus lines along interior rivers and setting up regulated pump stations where gasoline prices match the government set rate found in the capital.

Bouterse's NDP Makes its Bid for the Maroons

5. The fuel price controversy provided a hook for the NDP to curry favor with Maroon groups both in the interior and the city. Bouterse's NDP had already, with hard campaigning and big promises, won 4 out of the 10 available interior seats in May's election, up from 3 in the 2000 election. In Paramaribo the NDP won almost a third of the 17 available seats, but it may now be eyeing the AC's one Paramaribo seat, won with eight percent of the voters. To build support, NDP party members have strongly criticized the government for ignoring the interior's economic hardships and are promoting the NDP as the defender of the interior while simultaneously tapping into the discontent of Maroons living in the capital.

6. (U) Bouterse consistently rails against the higher price of fuel in the interior during political rallies and street demonstrations, calling for a reversal of the price hike. Maroon NDP parliamentarian Andre Misiekaba has been very outspoken in DNA debates and submitted a motion, which was defeated, to provide financial compensation to interior inhabitants to offset price increases. Two of his NDP

colleagues recently claimed there would be social unrest in the interior if the government does not take measures to ease the effects of the new gas price. Bouterse and his party supporters have also been working the streets of disadvantaged neighborhoods in Paramaribo that have significant Maroon populations to rally support. (See ref B). Local residents were quoted as saying they had voted for the AC but were disappointed in their performance, so they now supported the NDP.

Maroons: Not a Political Monolith

17. (U) It is unlikely that either the NDP or the AC will ever speak for all Maroons, because their voting patterns are roughly divided along tribal and geographic lines. The AC's base lies in the eastern district of Marowijne where in the last election it won two of the three available DNA seats and garnered double the votes of the NDP, which lost its only seat there. The majority of Maroons living in Marowijne are from the Aukaner tribe, one of the major Maroon tribes. (See ref C). All three AC cabinet members and five DNA members stem from the Aukaner tribe and are members of either the ABOP or BEP parties. The third AC party, Seeka, consists primarily of members of the Saramaccan tribe who live mainly in the southern districts of Brokopondo and Sipilawini. It is among this tribe that the NDP enjoys its strongest support. Of the seven available DNA seats in the two districts during May's election, the NDP won four while the AC won only two. The New Front picked up the last seat.

18. (SBU) Late in October, suspected NDP mischief brought the tribal differences within the AC to light, when a group calling itself the AC Action Group demanded the AC pull out of the governing coalition within 48 hours or face unspecified consequences. It claimed widespread coalition support at a press conference. AC leaders dismissed the group as inconsequential low ranking party members and ignored the ultimatum, whose deadline passed with no action taken. Not long after the Action Group emerged, media reported that elements within the NDP were behind the stunt. An AC member told the Embassy that an internal coalition investigation led to the same conclusion. There were even unconfirmed media reports that after the group's first press conference, the group's members were at a bar having drinks with Bouterse. The Action Group's leaders belong to the SEEKA party and the Saramaccan tribe, whose members are reportedly unhappy with their party and tribe's lack of DNA and cabinet positions, despite the success of their coalition.

19. (U) The mistrust between the AC and NDP also surfaced recently when AC leader Ronnie Brunswijk, former rebel leader, convicted narcotics trafficker, and DNA member, demanded that President Venetiaan allow AC ministers to use their own security personnel as opposed to the regular security detail from the Surinamese Central Intelligence and Security Services (CIVD). Brunswijk justified the request by saying the Ministers should have only trusted personnel surrounding them. Media reports went further and claimed that the AC leaders suspected CIVD security agents assigned to the AC ministers of being loyal to the NDP and of working as informants.

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COMMENT  
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110. (SBU) The NDP's political strategy is to attack what they see as the weakest link in the New Front Plus coalition, the AC. The NDP likely wants to drive the AC into confrontation with its New Front partner over interior and urban poverty issues and create enough unrest among the AC base that the AC might step out of the governing coalition. This would strip away President Venetiaan's parliamentary majority in the National Assembly and paralyze the political process. For Bouterse, there may be additional personal value in constraining the government's maneuvering room and confidence, should he hope to coerce the government into abandoning his pending prosecution for the murders of 15 prominent opposition members during his military rule in 1982. Embassy reckons that for the present the AC leaders believe their opportunities to affect change for their constituents, and themselves, argue for them staying in the coalition. However tensions are real and parties will continue to vie for Maroon support.

BARNES

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